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SUB-COMMISSION ON PREVENTION OF DISCRIMINATION AND
PROTECTION OF MINORITIES

Forty-ninth session

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE FIRST PART (PUBLIC)* OF THE 15th MEETING

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva,
on Thursday, 14 August 1997, at 3 p.m.

Chairperson: Mrs. WARZAZI

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(a) TRADITIONAL PRACTICES AFFECTING THE HEALTH OF WOMEN AND THE GIRL CHILD;

(b) THE ROLE AND EQUAL PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN DEVELOPMENT (continued)

* The summary record of the second part (closed) of the meeting appears as document E/CN.4/Sub.2/1997/SR.15/Add.1.

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The meeting was called to order at 3.10 p.m.

THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE HUMAN RIGHTS OF WOMEN:

(a) TRADITIONAL PRACTICES AFFECTING THE HEALTH OF WOMEN AND THE GIRL CHILD;

(b) THE ROLE AND EQUAL PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN DEVELOPMENT (agenda item 5) (continued) (E/CN.4/Sub.2/1997/10 and Add.1; E/CN.4/Sub.2/1997/NGO/6)

1. Ms. RAS-WORK (Inter-African Committee (IAC) on Traditional Practices Affecting the Health of Women and Children) said she wished to congratulate Mrs. Warzazi on her excellent report and its objective analysis of the phenomenon of traditional practices. The violations to which women were subjected ranged from deprivation of economic security to physical mutilation, their purpose being to ensure that women were completely dominated by men. Mrs. Warzazi's report demonstrated that a false interpretation of religion, advanced as justification for those practices, was at the root of the perpetuation of violence against women. That violence took different forms in different countries: genital mutilation, artificial elongation of women's necks, forced marriage, female infanticide or preferential treatment for male children. It was the lack of means of survival other than dependence on men that compelled women to submit to that degrading treatment. In order to put an end to that situation, a change of attitudes was indispensable at all levels, and it was through such means as education and information that women would achieve self-realization.

2. Her organization, which had been dealing with the issue of traditional practices, and in particular genital mutilation, for the past 14 years, focused on grass-roots mobilization through information and educational programmes tailored to the various socio-cultural contexts. That cautious approach, based on mutual respect and confidence-building, had enabled it to conduct effective programmes in 26 countries. In collaboration with international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), it also aimed at bringing about policy changes on the part of Governments, and it was mainly thanks to those NGOs that the issue of traditional practices now figured prominently on the agendas of human rights meetings. Dialogue with local organizations working in the field was also essential in order to map out acceptable approaches to the issue and reject solutions involving political or financial blackmail. It was also worrying to note that in some countries, such as the Gambia, Sierra Leone and Egypt, where women were beginning to question the validity of the practice, that new awareness was encountering opposition in certain quarters. The debates on the subject involved judges, religious leaders, directors of communication and presidents, but the direct victims of genital mutilation took no part in them and were thus not only excluded from the decision-making process, but also denied the right to decide on the integrity of their own bodies.

3. In conclusion, her organization called upon the Sub-Commission to provide Mrs. Warzazi with the resources required for her to continue her

study, and urged Governments to mobilize resources to support the organizations working to eradicate harmful traditional practices in their respective countries.

4. Ms. NEDHIR (African Bureau of Educational Sciences - ABES-OAU) denounced the various forms of discrimination on grounds of gender, race and ethnic origin, against women belonging to racial minorities. In particular, she drew the Sub-Commission's attention to the alarming situation facing women of African descent in the United States of America. Those women, who were the main source of livelihood for their families and their communities and were often single parents, were located on the bottom rung of the ladder in every social category and were living in virtually third-world conditions in a first-world country. Low-income women, who for the most part were women of colour, had been the main recipients of the Aid to Families with Dependent Children programme, which had been restructured so as to restrict assistance to a maximum of five years while not providing the necessary job training to enable recipients to move towards self-sufficiency. Owing to that lack of adequate training and job opportunity, women of colour continued to be exploited in the workplace. In any case, fewer and fewer poorly paid jobs were available in the United States and competition to obtain them further depressed wages. Given that the cost of living was also rising, women were having to work as many as 70 hours a week, 50 weeks a year, to try to haul themselves above the poverty line. By the year 2000, at least half of all new jobs would require a university degree, and those women who had not been able to afford a higher education would be excluded. Education was the only real route out of poverty for women, but new obstacles were constantly erected to block that route.

5. The economic, social and educational discrimination to which women were subjected was compounded by the crimes committed against them in the context of civil wars, which had replaced international conflicts over the past 20 years. In some countries rape of women activists and female relatives of male activists had become an effective method of reprisal. Those violent sexual attacks on women must be regarded as war crimes if their perpetrators were to be brought swiftly to justice. During the 1992 coup d'état in Haiti several women had been the victims of sexual violence by the Tontons Macoute, but nothing had been done to punish their attackers. Similarly, those responsible for the systematic rape of women and children during the conflict in Bosnia and Croatia had still not been brought to trial.

6. In view of all those acts of violence, her organization supported the recommendation by Ms. McDougall that the world conference against racism, racial and ethnic discrimination, xenophobia and other related contemporary forms of intolerance should deal with the question of discrimination from the threefold standpoint of race, social class and gender. It also urged the Sub-Commission to intensify the activities of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women so as to enable it to assist States parties in addressing the marginalization of women of colour; and urged States to recognize that rape and acts of violence against women in conflicts fell within the jurisdiction of war tribunals.

7. Mr. TANDAR (Observer for Afghanistan) said there was no need to expatiate on the major role that women must play in improving countries'

living conditions, or on the long road that lay ahead before they could fully enjoy their most basic rights. New obstacles, including sexism, sexual exploitation, extremism and fanaticism, constantly arose to block their path to emancipation. In his delegation's view, the State had a unique role to play as a driving-force in improving the situation of women and encouraging their participation in all sectors, and especially in development. Unfortunately, the rising tide of fanaticism and extremism across the world was a danger calling for universal vigilance and general mobilization for, in their denial of the rule of law, those ideologies threatened every nation's future and material and spiritual well-being, and also international security.

8. Afghanistan, which for so long had struggled against a super-Power to safeguard its own identity and independence, was now faced with a particularly despicable and reactionary form of fanaticism, namely, the Taliban movement, a military movement characterized by its fascist ideology and inquisitorial practices. That movement's two enemies were peace and women, and its one objective was the distortion of Islam. In Taliban-held areas, women and girls had been stripped of their rights. They were prohibited from studying, working, leaving their home, being treated by male doctors, and participating in the social, cultural, political and economic life of the country. They were publicly beaten, stoned and humiliated. They were regarded as evil incarnate, serving no purpose other than to satisfy men's needs and bear children. He gave examples of decrees and laws promulgated by the Taliban and implemented in the areas under their control, such as the decree forbidding women to wear shoes with heels, since men would be aroused by the sound of their footsteps. He also cited the remarks made by the Chief of the Taliban, a conspicuous nonentity and self-proclaimed "Commander of the Faithful", which eloquently reflected his contempt for women, whom he wished to confine to menial tasks so as to spare them "the sad fate of western women, who have been metamorphosed into gaudily painted dolls and sex objects". Similarly, the self-styled Chairman of the Council of Ulemas of the Taliban had indicated, during his discussion with the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan, that according to the teachings of the Holy Koran women must stay at home and not even leave their homes in order to study or work.

9. As a result, millions of Afghan women were subjected to a living hell by the Taliban, a people's sovereignty was flouted and the law trampled underfoot. He stressed that the practices to which Afghan women were subjected by the Taliban were totally alien to the country's cultural and religious values. From time immemorial, women had played an important role in Afghanistan's political, economic, agricultural, craft and pastoral activities, and the Afghan army had even numbered a woman general and several women lieutenants among its officers. If nothing was done to eradicate the fascist ideology of the Taliban, the whole region would suffer as a result. Fanatical movements demanding the same obedience as the Taliban already threatened Pakistan.

10. In conclusion, he strongly reaffirmed his country's attachment to democracy and respect for human rights and the rights of women, as laid down in the relevant international instruments, as well as its rejection of any form of discrimination based on ethnic, religious or linguistic affiliation or on gender.

11. Mr. CHOWDHURY (Observer for Bangladesh) welcomed the fact tnat the various international conferences on women's issues, and in particular the Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing, had revealed an improvement in the situation of women, equality between the sexes, educational and health conditions and life expectancy, and a reduction in maternal mortality rates. In many regions of the world, however, the doors to economic and political opportunities were still closed to women, as was clearly shown by the fact that they made up 70 per cent of the world's poor.

12. Bangladesh had been an independent sovereign nation for 25 years, and women had made an immeasurable contribution to its struggle for liberation. Sheikh Hasina, now Prime Minister and the daughter of the Father of the Nation, was working to transform into reality the principle of equality between women and men set forth in the 1972 Constitution, which provided that the State must take special care to ensure equal participation of women in all spheres of national life. Bangladesh society was undergoing rapid transformation, and the Government was working to integrate women in the socio-economic development process. Faithful to the commitments it had made at the Beijing Conference, Bangladesh had been among the first States to set up an independent ministry for the advancement of women, and every ministry included a special unit responsible for implementing "women in development programmes". Women participated freely in national and local elections. A minimum of 10 per cent of parliamentary seats were reserved for them, and the proportion of women among senior civil servants was 8 per cent whereas, according to UNICEF, the world average was 7 per cent. Education for girl students was greatly encouraged through various programmes. The social changes taking place in Bangladesh were reflected in the increase in the number of working women in both urban and rural areas. Almost 1 million women were employed in the production of ready-made garments, and the policy of providing micro-credit had become a major instrument of social progress, for it was estimated that more than 6 million women were now self-employed in the rural areas. It should also be noted that the seven countries in south Asia that had formed the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) had decided to give the highest priority to women, and had declared a Decade for the Girl Child, whose target was the elimination of absolute poverty by the year 2002. All those countries had democratic systems founded on respect for women's rights.

13. He wished to inform the Sub-Commission that Bangladesh had withdrawn its reservations pertaining to articles 13 (a) and 16 (a) of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.

14. Mr. ALVAREZ (Observer for Costa Rica) welcomed Mrs. Warzazi's report and urged her to continue her valuable study. Illustrating his remarks with the concrete example of a footballer or basketball player who earned millions of dollars from allowing his name to appear on a piece of sports equipment, while the women or girls who manufactured the equipment earned less than two dollars a day, he said that unless labour legislation was standardized across the world, inequalities would continue to increase, as would exploitation of female workers, in terms not only of wages but also of their health and living conditions. Extreme poverty would become widespread, threatening social peace throughout the world.

15. Costa Rica had distinguished itself by its efforts to promote and protect human rights, particularly with regard to equal treatment between women and men, an area in which significant progress had been made. However, the situation was not yet entirely satisfactory and the Government continued to step up its policies for improving the situation of women, as could be seen from the adoption in March 1990 of the Act for the Promotion of Social Equality between Women and Men. It should also be stressed that Costa Rica had been one of the first States to ratify the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, and that his delegation participated actively in the working group established to develop an optional protocol to that Convention.

16. With regard to education and health, access to the existing programmes was open to men and women, nationals and foreigners, without discrimination. His delegation was thus very surprised to hear the unfounded accusations levelled against his country by the Commission for the Defence of Human Rights in Central America, since Costa Rica had always extended a helping hand to its neighbours in the region.

17. Mr. AL-KAISSI (Observer for Iraq) welcomed the fact that the advancement of women was a priority objective of the international community. Women had always occupied an important place in Iraq. Shariah law guaranteed them equal rights, inter alia in education, and financial independence. Since the revolution of 1968, new rights had been conferred on Iraqi women, who were now to be found in all spheres of activity, often occupying positions of responsibility. Iraq had contributed to and participated in the Copenhagen, Nairobi and Beijing Conferences on issues relating to women and was preparing its fourth periodic report to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women. Moreover, its programme for the advancement of women until the year 2000 had been prepared in the light of the Beijing Platform for Action. And in the report it had recently submitted to the Commission on the Status of Women in New York, it had given details of everything that had been done for women in Iraq.

18. But the Iraqi Government's efforts were being thwarted by the embargo imposed on the country since 1990. By depriving Iraqi women of food and medicines, the embargo violated their very right to life. Many Iraqi women had had to abandon their studies or give up working, 73 per cent of them suffered from anaemia and the maternal mortality rate had risen from 36 per 1,000 to 120 per 1,000. Yet the Beijing Platform for Action had condemned the imposition on another country of measures harmful to women's and children's rights as incompatible with the rules of international law. He therefore requested the Sub-Commission to ensure that the relevant resolutions were implemented, so that the victims in Iraq would not have the impression that they had been forgotten by the international community.

The public part of the meeting rose at 4 p.m.